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ABSTRACT

After World War II the United States centered its foreign policy on the containment of communism, at home and abroad. Although it was aimed primarily at containing the spread of communism in Europe, the policy also extended to Asia. Asia proved to be the site of the first major battle waged in the name of containment: the Korean War. Dividing Korea in half came about at the end of World War II. In an effort to avoid a long-term decision regarding Korea's future, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to divide Korea temporarily along the 28th parallel, a latitudinal line that bisected the country. War between North and South Korea broke out along the 38th parallel on June 25, 1950. The U.S. decision to intervene in Korea grew out of the tense atmosphere that characterized Cold War politics. This lesson plan provides an historical background of the conflict; reproduces President Harry Truman's statement ordering troops to Korea; identifies the National History Standards and National Civics and Government Standards correlations; and presents seven activities for analyzing the document. Also contains a written document analysis worksheet. (BT)

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TEACHING WITH DOCUMENTS

The United States Enters the Korean Conflict

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Teaching With Documents Lesson Plan:
The United States Enters the Korean Conflict

Background

While the end of World War II brought peace and prosperity to most Americans, it also created a heightened state of tension between the Soviet Union and the United States. Fearing that the Soviet Union intended to "export" communism to other nations, America centered its foreign policy on the "containment" of communism, both at home and abroad. Although formulation of the Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, and the Berlin Airlift suggested that the United States had a particular concern with the spread of communism in Europe, America's policy of containment extended to Asia as well. Indeed, Asia proved to be the site of the first major battle waged in the name of containment: the Korean War.

In 1950 the Korea Peninsula was divided between a Soviet-backed government in the north and an American-backed government in the south. The division of Korea into two halves had come at the end of World War II. In August of 1945 the Soviet Union invaded Korea, which had been under Japan's control since 1910. Fearing that the Soviets intended to seize the entire peninsula from their position in the north, the United States quickly moved its own troops into southern Korea. Japanese troops surrendered to the Russians in the north and to the Americans in the south. In an effort to avoid a long-term decision regarding Korea's future, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to divide Korea temporarily along the 38th parallel, a latitudinal line that bisected the country. This line became more rigid after 1946, when Kim Il Sung organized a communist government in the north---the Democratic People's Republic. Shortly after, nationalist exile Syngman Rhee returned to Korea and set up a rival government in the south---the Republic of Korea (ROK). Each government hoped to reunify the country under its own rule.

War broke out along the 38th parallel on June 25, 1950. On that day, North Korean troops coordinated an attack at several strategic points along the parallel and headed south toward Seoul. The United Nations Security Council responded to the attack by adopting (by a 9-0 vote) a resolution that condemned the invasion as a "breach of the peace." The Council did not have a Soviet delegate, since 6 months prior, the Soviet Union had left to protest the United

Nation's refusal to seat a delegate from China. President Harry S. Truman quickly committed American forces to a combined United Nations military effort and named Gen. Douglas MacArthur Commander of the U.N. forces. Fifteen other nations also sent troops under the U.N. command. Truman did not seek a formal declaration of war from Congress; officially, America's presence in Korea amounted to no more than a "police action."

However, the entry of the United States into the conflict signaled a reversal of policy toward Korea. Although it backed the government of Syngman Rhee, the United States had begun withdrawing its troops from South Korea in 1948. As late as January of 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson had implied that the Korea Peninsula lay outside the all-important "defense perimeter" of the United States, a statement that some took to mean that the United States would not defend the ROK from communist attack.

So why did the United States become involved in the Korean conflict?

The decision to intervene in Korea grew out of the tense atmosphere that characterized Cold War politics. On the eve of the North Korean invasion, a number of events had made Truman anxious. The Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb in 1949, ending the United States' monopoly on the weapon. In Europe, Soviet intervention in Greece and Turkey had given rise to the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, which funneled aid to war-torn Europe in the hopes of warding off communist political victories. In early 1950, President Truman directed the National Security Council (NSC) to conduct an analysis of Soviet and American military capabilities. In its report, known as "NSC 68," the Council recommended heavy increases in military funding to help contain the Soviets.

Events in Asia also contributed to an increased sense of insecurity. In 1949 China underwent a revolution that brought Mao Zedong and his Communist party into power. The nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-Shek, had retreated to the island of Formosa (Taiwan) while they continued their war with mainland China. Mao quickly moved to ally himself with the Soviet Union, and signed a treaty with the Soviets in 1950. The Truman administration faced criticism from Republicans who claimed he had "lost" China. They criticized him for not providing enough aid to the Chinese nationalists. The suggestion by Secretary of State Dean Acheson that the administration recognize the communist government of China only gave them more ammunition for their attacks.

The Truman administration also faced internal criticism regarding its commitment to anticommunism at home. Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin had recently begun his infamous hunt for communists within the U. S. Government. Although McCarthy was just warming up, the recent trials of Alger Hiss and others for espionage left the Truman administration apprehensive about its anticommunist credentials. Truman and his advisors

found themselves under increased domestic pressure not to appear "soft" on communism abroad.

Thus, when North Korean troops invaded the South, the Truman administration seized upon the opportunity to defend a noncommunist government from invasion by communist troops. Determined not to "lose" another country to communism, and interested in shoring up its anticommunist credentials, the Truman administration found itself defending a nation a world away from U.S. soil. Yet Truman's response was not merely a response to internal pressure. The invasion of South Korea made Truman genuinely fearful that the Soviet Union and China intended to expand the sphere of communism throughout Asia.

Truman's statement of June 27 illustrates his concern with communist aggression and expansion. In it, Truman argues that "communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war." Truman's statement suggests that he believed the attack by North Korea had been part of a larger plan by communist China and, by extension, the Soviet Union. The President believed that the Korean situation was similar to that of Greece in 1947. He informed his advisors that he believed the invasion was "very obviously inspired by the Soviet Union." This gave America a moral imperative to act. "If we don't put up a fight now," Truman observed to his staff, there was "no telling what they'll do." His concern over the future of anticommunist governments in Asia showed in his public statement. Truman pledged to defend Formosa (Taiwan) from attack and to support French forces in Indochina, a conflict that would eventually escalate into the Vietnam War. Yet Truman had no wish to provoke a full-scale war with the Soviets. By blaming "communism" in the statement, as opposed to the Soviet Union, Dean Acheson later explained, the administration sought to give the Soviets a "graceful exit" and not provoke open confrontation with Russia.

Truman's statement also reflected a new military order. Although the United States took the lead in the Korean action, it did so under the rubric of the United Nations. Truman made it clear that his actions fell within the measures recommended by the United Nations, and reminded "all members of the United Nations" to "consider carefully the consequences of this latest aggression in Korea" and that America "will continue to uphold the rule of law."

This document is part of the George M. Elsey papers, located at the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri. Elsey, who had worked under President Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II, was a top administrative assistant to the President. Truman met with Elsey and other advisors on the morning of the 27th to draft and revise the public statement--his second on the Korean conflict. At 11:30 a.m. the President met with members of the foreign affairs and foreign relations committees of Congress and, shortly after, the statement was released to newspaper reporters. That afternoon, Truman attended another meeting of the United Nations to propose a resolution

urging all members of the United Nations to give assistance to South Korea. The meeting had been originally planned for the morning but was postponed to accommodate one of its members. Secretary of State Dean Acheson later reflected that the Soviets liked to point out that since the U.N. meeting occurred after the President's statement, Truman could not truthfully claim that his decision to commit forces was influenced by the wishes of the United Nations. When it did meet later that day, the United Nations passed his resolution, although a handful of dissenting countries abstained.

The Document

Document 1: Statement of President Harry S. Truman, June 27, 1950
Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, Papers of George M. Elsey

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Lesson Resources

Standards Correlations

Teaching Activities

Document Analysis Worksheet

Page URL: http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/korean_conflict/korean_conflict.html

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Teaching Activities

Standards Correlations

This lesson correlates to the National History Standards.

- Era 9-Postwar United States (1945 - Early 1970s)
  - Standard 2A-Examine the US response to the Chinese Revolution and its impact on the Cold War; Analyze the causes of the Korean War and how a divided Korea remained a source of international tension.

This lesson correlates to the National Standards for Civics and Government.

- Standard IV.B.2.-Evaluate, take, and defend positions about how United States foreign policy is made and the means by which it is carried out.

Cross-curricular Connections

Share this exercise with your history and government colleagues.

Analyzing the Document

1. Direct students to locate the Korea Penninsula on a world map. Provide them with information from the background essay about Korea's 20th-century history and ask them to locate Japan, the former U.S.S.R, the United States, China, and the 38th parallel.

2. Provide each student with a copy of the statement of President Harry S. Truman (Document 1). Ask them to read the document, then lead a class discussion using the following questions: What type of document is it? When was it written? What was its purpose?

3. Divide students into two groups. Ask the first group to make a list of reasons why the United States entered the Korean conflict using the information provided in the document. Ask the second group to make a list of reasons why the United States entered the Korean conflict using the information provided in their textbooks. Lead a class discussion

comparing the two lists.

4. Ask students to look closely at the language of Truman's statement of June 27. Ask them what Truman meant by "Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations." Ask them what "subversion" means and what it meant to people during the Cold War. Ask them to list other examples of fear of subversion in the 1950s.

5. Ask students to draft their own public statements announcing the entry of the United States into the Korean conflict in June 1950.

6. Tell students that in response to Truman's statement of June 27th, the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* blamed the Korean conflict on a "provocative attack by the troops of the puppet government of South Korea." Write the following excerpt from the *Pravda* editorial on an overlay and show it to the students:

   "Truman's statement and actions, unprecedented in the international relations of the post-war period, are just one more indication that the American ruling circles no longer limit themselves to preparation for aggression, but have gone over to direct acts of aggression… As is known, neither the United Nations nor any other international organ empowered the government of the USA to take those actions related to Korea and China that Truman announced yesterday. Undertaking their open aggressive act, the American government apparently intended to present the United Nations with a fait accompli."

   Ask your students to write a paragraph comparing the language and argument of *Pravda*'s editorial with that of Truman's statement.

7. Korea is still divided near the 38th parallel into two countries. Ask students to locate a recent news article (print or online) about tensions between North and South Korea, and use these articles as a starting point to talk about the origins of this division.

The document featured in this article comes from the Papers of George M. Elsey at the Harry S. Truman Library.[http://www.trumanlibrary.org/] It is available, with hundreds of others related to the Korean War [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/korea/index.html], through Project Whistlestop. Project Whistlestop [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/educatio.htm] enables educators to work with the original source material of the Truman Library; to use technology and primary sources in project-based learning experiences in the classroom; and to develop an online resource of original Truman Library documents, photographs, records, cartoons, and other archival material for student research projects.

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Korea 2443

DOCUMENT MILITARY

JUNE 27, 1950

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

In Korea the Government forces, which were armed to prevent border raids and to preserve internal security, were attacked by invading forces from North Korea. The Security Council of the United Nations called upon the invading troops to cease hostilities and to withdraw to the 38th parallel. This they have not done, but on the contrary have pressed the attack. The Security Council called upon all members of the United Nations to render every assistance to the United Nations in the execution of this resolution. In these circumstances I have ordered United States air and sea forces to give the Korean Government troops cover and support.

#1

The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war. It has defied the orders of the Security Council of the United Nations issued to preserve international peace and security. In these circumstances the occupation of Formosa by Communist forces would be a direct threat to the security of the Pacific area and to United States forces performing their lawful and necessary functions in that area.

Accordingly I have ordered the Seventh Fleet to prevent any attack on Formosa. As a corollary of this action I am calling upon the Chinese Government on Formosa to cease all air and sea operations against the mainland. The Seventh Fleet will see that this is done. The determination of the future status of Formosa must await the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace settlement with Japan, or consideration by the United Nations.

#2

I have also directed that United States forces in the Philippines be strengthened and that military assistance to the Philippine Government be accelerated.

#3

I have similarly directed acceleration in the furnishing of military assistance to the forces of France and the Associated States in Indo China and the dispatch of a military mission to provide close working relations with those forces.

#4

I know that all members of the United Nations will consider carefully the consequences of this latest aggression in Korea in defiance of the Charter of the United Nations. A return to the rule of force in international affairs would have far reaching effects. The United States will continue to uphold the rule of law.

I have instructed Ambassador Austin, as the representative of the United States to the Security Council, to report these steps to the Council.

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Document 1: Statement of President Harry S. Truman, June 27, 1950

Written Document Analysis Worksheet

1. TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):

___ Newspaper	___ Map	___ Advertisement
___ Letter	___ Telegram	___ Congressional record
___ Patent	___ Press release	___ Census report
___ Memorandum	___ Report	___ Other

2. UNIQUE PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):

___ Interesting letterhead	___ Notations
___ Handwritten	___ "RECEIVED" stamp
___ Typed	___ Other
___ Seals	

3. DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:
_____

4. AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:
_____

POSITION (TITLE):
_____

5. FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?
_____

6. DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)

A. List three things the author said that you think are important:
_____
_____
_____

B. Why do you think this document was written?
_____
_____

C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.
_____
_____

D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written:
_____
_____

E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:
_____
_____

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